

BITTERSWEET

A CREATIVE PROJECT

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

FOR THE DEGREE

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

BY

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JUNE 2018

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Abstract

CREATIVE PROJECT: Bittersweet

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DEGREE: Master of Fine Arts

COLLEGE: Fine Arts

DATE: July 2018

PAGES: 33

Bittersweet is a visual exploration of the incomprehensible qualities of loss. As humans we draw connections from what we have previously observed in order to influence what we are currently experiencing. This body of work utilizes sensory associations from familiar materials such as fabric, wax, and honey to inspire connections from within our own memories. The employment of objects both useful and sentimental becomes a method of communicating a story. The replication of these objects into glass influences and alters the objects meaning. The glass components inhibit and distort their original function. They become more ephemeral and transitory. The intertwining of materials develops the work's emotionality, seeking to build a space to remember, cherish and grieve through the personification of experiences of both those living with memory loss and those they leave behind. Through the manipulation of objects of everyday life, this body of work consisting of sculptural and installation based components, draws upon the emotive qualities of objects and materials in order to explore the universal complexities of memory and mourning.

Statement of the Problem

Like scars upon skin, the life of an object is recorded by the way it is worn. The tiny chips in the lip of an aged jar tell of its forty years surviving as a trusted vessel for fall canning. Like that of objects, a human's story of endurance is carried within each subtle mar. Though each wrinkle carries memory, its history cannot always be read. Over time, the delicate pages smudge and fade, leaving us to wonder: who are we without our memories?

There are an estimated forty-seven million people worldwide living with this question.¹ Five and a half million people in the United States alone suffer from Alzheimer's Disease.² Those affected struggle to remember their lives, losing their memories and motor functions day by day. As those inflicted slowly lose touch with who they are, their loved ones struggle to carry what is left of their memories. This duality is the central focus of my creative project, *Bittersweet*, and is explored through multi-media sculpture and installation art.

Recently, contemporary glass has been gaining momentum within conceptual art, performance, installation, and sculpture. Glass as a material has a physical memory and scars throughout the creation process. Each step, whether a success or a mistake, weighs upon and is visible within the final outcome. The pieces created carry their histories within them, just as humans do. I am inspired by the metaphors surrounding the process of glassmaking, as well as the emotive qualities of objects and material associations. Wood for example, has long been utilized for utilitarian purposes and as a material feels approachable, strong, and natural. Glass on the other hand can seem more complex and unapproachable. It can appear ephemeral, fragile, and cold, yet simultaneously archival, protective, precious, and sentimental. The utilization of

¹ "Alzheimer's and Dementia: Global Resources." Alzheimer's Association. May 28, 2014. Accessed August 24, 2017. <https://alz.org/global>.

² "Latest Alzheimer's Facts and Figures." Alzheimer's Association. March 29, 2016. Accessed August 24, 2017. <http://www.alz.org/facts/>.

installation allows the viewer to experience the work through multiple senses at one time, and become more encompassed by it. This is of great benefit to the work as multiple senses contribute to the recollection of memory and sentiment.³ Domestic items such as furniture, fabric, wax, and honey, inspire sense associations, through smell and touch, from within our own memories. This recollection in combination with the recreation of objects (both useful and sentimental) into glass becomes a method of communicating a story.

Having spent the last ten years caring for a loved one suffering with Alzheimer's disease, I know first-hand how devastating it can be for both the victim and their families. Days spent watching a loved one struggle causes feelings of helplessness and a sense of guilt over the irrevocable loss. The feelings of the survivor often mirror the feelings of the inflicted for both are experiencing anguish and grief. This body of work draws from these difficult emotions in order to initiate associations within the viewer, reminding them of their own experiences (both bitter and sweet) surrounding memory and loss. Whether recreating a moment, mourning a loss, or exorcising a familiarity, my work serves to establish an emotional connection and allow others space to remember, cherish and grieve their own memories through the sculptural personifications of the experiences of both those living with the disease and of those they leave behind.

³ *Scientific American Mind*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (March/April 2012), pp. 58

Review of Influences/Literature

Mark Twain once said, “Write what you know.” Like Twain, I draw from both observed and personal history. I grew up in a small town in rural Wisconsin, cared for by my grandparents. The manner in which I was raised influences both my aesthetic and the contents of my work. My happiest memories as a child are of collecting objects found within the abandoned buildings on my grandfather’s farmland and of staying up late with my grandmother canning food from the garden. Although these beloved experiences and collections now belong only to me, they continue to live on and are shared through my work which centers around memory, loss of home, and the grieving process.

My work personifies objects of everyday life in order to explore the incomprehensible qualities of the aforementioned subjects. By nature, I am both intrigued and inspired by the assignment of significance to the ordinary. I have a background in psychology and am fascinated by the influence of history and collective memory upon humans. It influences their natural tendencies, their interactions with each other and with objects, as well as their ability to form sentiment. This sentimentality is an important aspect of my sculptural and installation work. Much of my conceptual research is influenced by philosophers, psychologists and social psychologists who delve into topics of memory, object association, and the grieving process.

I’m interested in the works of social psychologist, Sherry Turkle, and her research on the developing connections between humans and artifacts. In her book, *Evocative Objects*, Turkle examines the emotional and intellectual associations humans attribute to objects. Her book explores how interactions with these everyday objects impact our lives and allow us to think self-reflectively. *Evocative Objects* is a collection of samples of writing from scientists, humanitarians, psychologists, artists, and writers, deciphering object’s abilities to anchor

memory, inspire thought, and sustain meaning. On this the author states, “We think with the objects we love; we love the objects we think with.”⁴ Turkle is fascinated by the objects her subjects have chosen to hang on to and seeks to dissect their significance and how it became attributed to them. Some of her subjects retain objects from a happy moment, a life-changing event, or a loved one who has passed away. Turkle notices how emotion is often inseparable from how we view even the humblest of objects and asserts that it is natural and almost innate to assign associations to objects of which we are accustomed. She believes that these customary objects in turn become almost a part of us, inspiring thought and self-actualization. Following this theory, Turkle delves deeply into how these object associations and personal connections are developed and how they are fostered. Her finding is that it is the balance between familiarity and unfamiliarity and an association to a time, event, place or feeling that truly makes an object meaningful. I aim to achieve this evocative balance within my work.

Freud pioneered the exploration of this balance of familiarity and unfamiliarity in his 1953 book, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Here, Freud often refers to the paradoxical sensation of being simultaneously familiar with, yet unfamiliar with an object as, “the uncanny.”⁵ According to Freud, this feeling is thought to be a powerful tool in sparking memory association and empathy within the viewer. The uncanny derives its connection not from something foreign or unknown, but instead from something abnormally familiar. This extreme familiarity defeats our ability to separate ourselves from the notion of it, eliciting a strong emotional connection.

⁴ Mindell, Graham, and Sherry Turkle, *Evocative Objects: Things We Think With*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011, 7.

⁵ Freud, Sigmund. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Edited and translated by James Strachey. London: Hogarth Press, 1953, 368.

When one encounters loss, one must work to break down these emotional connections. In many of his works, Freud deeply investigated the relationships between attachment and grief. In *Mourning and Melancholia*, Freud discusses two main stages of the bereavement process. The first is a shorter, intense stage in which the mourner must work through the initial shock, disbelief, guilt and hostility surrounding the loss. In the second, longer lasting stage (which he calls, “The Work of Mourning”) the mourner must work to loosen ties with the deceased, struggling between the desire to hold on and the necessity to let go. In this stage the mourner must also recognize the loss of parts of themselves through the loss of someone else.⁶ Freud argues that failing to recognize this loss differentiates grieving from melancholia.

Through losing my mother figure, I lost my sense of home, safety and family. I also lost the part of myself that identified as a daughter. The notion of the loss of aspects of oneself through the loss of others is further expanded upon in Derrida’s, *The Work of Mourning*. Heavily influenced by the works of Freud, Derrida argues that we are who we are through others, and therefore when we lose someone, we in turn lose ourselves.⁷ This assertion further validates Freud’s approval of a second stage of grieving in which we grieve not only for who we’ve lost but also for ourselves. The 1996 translation of Derrida’s, *By Force of Mourning*, suggests that the work of mourning is never ending and unfathomable for those who have not grieved. Therefore, those who know loss are intrinsically connected and are able to understand one another through an unspoken language.⁸

⁶ Freud, Sigmund. *Mourning and Melancholia*. Collected Papers. Vol I4, 1917, 152-170.

⁷ Derrida, Jacques, *The Work of Mourning*. Edited by P.A. Brault and M. Naas. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2001, 107-115.

⁸ Derrida, Jacques. “By Force of Mourning.” Edited by P.A. Brault and M. Naas. *Critical Inquiry*, Vol 22. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1996, 172.

For me, art is both a method of coping and also a way of linking to a greater collective of knowledge. I admire perseverance, and I am interested in the sharing of accounts of personal history. Though we carry varying pasts, I believe in the ability of art to allow us to relate to one another through shared familiarity, memory associations and empathy. I draw inspiration from artists who survey the human experience through their exploration of domestic spaces, the manipulation of objects, and their ritual use of repetition. Some of such artists include Doris Salcedo, Rachel Whiteread, Ragnar Kjartansson and Allan McCollum.

Colombian artist, Doris Salcedo, chooses to work with items that are both second-hand and common to those living in marginalized populations. She utilizes the emotional connections people have with objects in order to discuss the war that began before her birth and continues to claim victims within her home country today. She believes using previously owned objects instills a sense of history and narrative within her work. Her sculptural and installation work combines domestic relics with evocative materials such as clothing, cement and animal fiber to create symbolic memorials for victims of extreme violence. She manipulates the space between the recognizable and the menacing in order to call attention to societies tendency of concurrently forgetting and remembering the violence of social and political conflict. She believes it is her responsibility to unearth the stories of the lives her objects once lived, allowing them to bear witness to the events that previously took place around them. One such example of this, is her installation entitled, *Atrabiliarios*.



Fig 1. Doris Salcedo, *Atrabiliarios*, 2004.⁹

Doris Salcedo's *Atrabiliarios* (*atra* meaning, “clothed in black,” and *bilis* meaning, “rage”) an installation in which shoes belonging to Colombian women, who are now missing or dead, rest within shoe box sized niches recessed into the walls. The worn shoes, displayed singularly or in pairs, were donated to Salcedo from families of victims of the civil conflicts in Colombia. Salcedo spent time with these families, conducting research about their situations and learning the stories of those they have lost. While interviewing the families, whom Salcedo refers to as “survivors,” she witnessed how many of them live in a constant state of torment, unknowing whether their missing loved one is alive or dead. Salcedo noted that many of the victim's families had to rely on recognizing the shoes of their loved ones in order to identify their body within a mass grave. Like Salcedo, I believe in an objects ability to carry history and meaning. Like Salcedo, I utilize symbolic objects to represent and express the stories of their owners within my work.

I am also interested in Salcedo's works that memorialize and universalize the grieving process, such as *Acción de Duelo*, which facilitates a space for public mourning. *Acción de*

⁹ Fig. 1. Doris Salcedo, *Atrabiliarios* Detail. 1992/2004. Shoes, timber, gyproc, cow bladder, surgical thread, overall dimensions vary. The Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago.

Duelo, meaning Dueling Action, was a six hour long performative installation that took place in Bogotá, Colombia's Plaza de Bolívar. The plaza itself existed before Colombia was formed and serves as the main square to its' capitol city. During the installation, 24,000 candles were placed by Salcedo and her crew. Then onlookers were invited to help light the candles in remembrance of the death of Colombia's Valle del Cauca Deputies, who had been taken hostage in 2002.

Humans by nature seek community and support. Works such as *Acción de Duelo* provide a space for viewers to relate their personal experiences to the ones of those depicted in Salcedo's work.

This connectivity through shared loss is a goal of my work.



Fig 2. *Acción de Duelo*, Doris Salcedo, 2007.¹⁰

¹⁰ Fig. 2. Doris Salcedo, *Acción de Duelo*, Detail. July, 3, 2007. The Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago.

British born artist, Rachel Whiteread, is another example of an artist whose work compellingly utilizes “the uncanny,” as well as presence versus absence and the sense of memorial. Whiteread is known for her cast replicas of both the negative and positives of ordinary objects, parts of the body, and empty spaces. She began by recreating parts of a whole that would be found together in a given situation. She then moved into casting pieces that could be put together to re-form entire spaces, aiming to “mummify the air in the room.”¹¹ One of her best known works is a nine feet wide, ten feet deep, and eleven feet high plaster casting entitled, *Ghost*.



Fig. 3. *Ghost*, Rachel Whiteread, 2009.¹²

¹¹ The National Gallery. *Rachel Whiteread: Ghost*, NGA video, 8:10. 2009. <https://www.nga.gov/Collection/art-object-page.131285.html>.

¹² Fig. 3. Rachel Whiteread, *Ghost*. Plaster on steel frame. The National Gallery, Landover, MD.

For this piece, Whiteread cast the negative space of an entire parlor which resided on the inside of a Victorian Era townhouse in London, England. She cast the parlor in sections, which she then reassembled upon a metal frame. Though its size commands space, the massive, tomblike structure radiates a deafening quiet and stillness within the gallery setting. Stripped of color and removed from its conventional use, the form provokes the memory of something recognizable, yet strangely distant. The once active domestic space is now frozen in time, like a photograph. The muteness of the plaster and the simplicity of the void form draw the viewer's attention to its rare intricate features such as the soot stained fireplace, the darkened hole of the door handle and the circular depression of the light switch. These small details, which would usually be overlooked, become increasingly important and expressive. *Ghost* simultaneously places the viewer inside and outside of the Victorian parlor at the same time. This concurrent presence and absence is a theme which I pursue within my work. The balance between accessibility and inaccessibility mimics that of a fading memory. It resembles the experience of grief and human connection as it makes the sculpture equally encompassing and isolating simultaneously.

In addition to duality, I'm also intrinsically drawn to the use of repetition and ritual within artwork and the process of creating. Repetition can be meditative and calming, or become tiring and frustrating over time. It relates to endurance and focus and may be cathartic. Repetition can cause something simple to become meaningful. It can elicit feelings of transcendence, or highlight the monotony of waiting and of being human. Ragnar Kjartansson is an Icelandic born performance and video artist who beautifully manipulates the qualities of repetition within his work. For him, repetition is a catalyst for catharsis and is very much about continually failing to reach perfection.

One of his works that utilizes repetition and explores the simultaneous themes of presence and absence, as well as community and isolation, is his video installation, *The Visitors*. This nine channel piece was filmed at the aged and beautiful Rokeby Farms Estate located in upstate New York. Using a setting so rich in history provides an overall feeling of nostalgia and melancholy to the work. It also contributes to the longstanding sense of time and waiting. Within the gallery, nine separate video screens are arranged within a spacious dark room. Each screen features one of eight different Icelandic musicians isolated within eight different rooms, playing instruments and singing. The musicians, lost in introspection, are all playing the same song, and are connected only through headphones. The ninth screen shows glimpses of their friends and family waiting patiently on the porch.

Throughout the video, the musicians repeat lyrics such as, “There are stars exploding around you and there’s nothing, nothing you can do.” The song is repetitive in lyric, but not in emotion, and continues on for sixty-four minutes. Within this time the viewer watches as each artist cycles through the many stages of grief throughout their performance. Each repeated line builds upon the next portraying a complex series of emotions before the video ends and then begins again. Though the piece takes much investment on the part of the viewer, requiring them to remain in the space for over an hour in order to witness the ending and observe the full cyclical intentions of the piece, it is rewarding. *The Visitors* discusses the stages of loss, the complexity and isolation of grieving and the notions of shared mourning through a digital experience that often brings invested viewers to tears.



Fig. 4. *The Visitors*, Ragnar Kjartansson, 2012.¹³

Another artist in who dissects repetition and the simultaneous nature of connectivity and loneliness in art work (especially in relation to the object) is multi-media artist, Allan McCollum. McCollum was born in Los Angeles, California in 1944 and grew up during the rise of the economy and the boom of mass production in the 1950s. This copy of a copy mindset heavily influences his work. In an interview found on his website, McCollum dissects several of his works of art that use repetition in the process of creating and revolve around the idea of being a recreation or “copy.”¹⁴ McCollum describes how replicas are both comforting and alienating simultaneously. To McCollum, a copy is comforting because while you are holding it, you know that there are others out there who have that very same item as you. He believes that through this

¹³ Fig. 4. Ragnar Kjartansson, *The Visitors*. Nine channel HD video projection with sound, 64 min., dimensions variable. The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, California.

<https://www.sfmoma.org/publication/soundtracks/ragnar-kjartansson/>

¹⁴ “Allan McCollum Interviewed by Thomas Lawson.” Interview by Thomas Lawson. *A.R.T. Press*, Los Angeles, 1996.

ownership, you are all connected. However, McCollum states that copies may also exemplify loss. This is because a copy is merely representative of something else, something that is no longer there. A replica is always a recreation and is a stand in for the original. In that way, copies are always about something that is absent. They then intrinsically carry a sense of mourning, death, or loss. McCollum believes that since replicas are often mass produced, they are abundantly found, and therefore absence is everywhere.¹⁵ McCollum's belief of a replication of an original representing both loss and connectivity reflects Freud's notions of the "uncanny," and is similar to my ideas about replicating objects into glass.



Fig. 5. *Over Ten Thousand Individual Works*, Allan McCollum, ongoing.¹⁶

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Fig 5. *Ibid.*

Descriptions and Images of the Artworks

Bittersweet was the title of the Master of Fine Arts Creative Project Exhibition of myself and Lily Rawson at Ball State University's Atrium Gallery. Since we were each allotted one room of the Atrium Gallery to exhibit within, we thought it best to have a cohesive exhibition title that applied to both of our bodies of work. We chose *Bittersweet* for its implications as an emotion that simultaneously encompasses happiness and sadness.



Fig. 6. *Bittersweet*, Allyssa Burch and Lily Rawson, Creative Project Exhibition, 2018

According to Merriam-Webster, bittersweet refers to, “something that is bittersweet; especially: pleasure accompanied by suffering or regret.”¹⁷ I believe that many memories carry a

¹⁷ Merriam-Webster Dictionary. Springfield, MA: G & C Merriam, 1981.

bittersweet sentiment. No matter how happy of a moment a memory may recall, it is always tinged with sadness for the moment is over, never to be perfectly relived. Though we are thankful to have spent time with someone and may remember them fondly, we cannot help but mourn for what we've lost. This contrasting notion was an overarching theme of my creative project which explores memory, loss, and grieving process.

Upon entering my exhibition space within the Atrium Gallery, the viewer was first confronted with a set of aged walls installed directly in front of them. I chose the traditional lath and plaster method to create the walls in order to distinguish them from the gallery space and to give the piece a sense of age and history that are appropriate for the loss the work relates to. The walls were built to fit the space, and section off a corner of the gallery where the display windows are located. They block the windows and form the back side of an installation piece titled *Cessation*. From the outside of the gallery, the walls prevent the viewer from looking into the full gallery space. Simultaneously, from inside of the gallery, the walls inhibit the viewer from seeing into the space created by the walls. Instead, the viewer must rely upon the memory of what they saw through the display windows before entering the gallery. As the viewer walks further into the exhibition space, the room opens up to the left of the constructed walls, revealing a dining table, a congregation of wooden chairs and a faint dripping sound.



Fig. 7. *Cessation*, (back view) Allyssa Burch, Atrium Gallery, 2018



Fig. 8. *Bittersweet*, Allyssa Burch, Exhibition View, Atrium Gallery, 2018

Attracted by the sound, the first piece viewers tend to approach is an installation entitled *Catch*. In *Catch*, a false ceiling installed within the gallery slowly drips water, mimicking a deteriorating roof. In art, the home is often a symbol of the self.¹⁸ As my mother figure, my grandmother was the center of my home and this domestic space speaks to the early stages of her Alzheimer's. Within this piece, the leaky roof (which is symbolic of a slowly growing problem) represents the weakening mind of someone suffering with memory loss. The water from the leaky ceiling gently drips down into three glass bowls, which sit upon a platform floor. The glass bowls catch the falling water, accentuating its preciousness and symbolizing an attempt to catch the falling memories, and maintain the home.

The choice of a bowl to catch the water over other container forms was made in order to convey the deliberateness of the catching of the water. Bowls are domestic and are often carried in a more protective manner. One might carry a bowl with two hands rather than only one. A mixing bowl is cradled in one arm as its contents are stirred. When we cup our hands together to get a drink, it forms a bowl shape. The symbolic contents of these bowls are precious and intended to be kept rather than discarded. The opal white color of the bowls adds to their preciousness as it illuminates in the light and sets them apart from the floorboards. It resembles the coloration of fog and draws upon associations such as purity, sincerity and spirituality, as well as gives the glass the aged look of water staining that collects over time.

The subtle but ominous sound of the dripping water echoing through the gallery accentuates the stillness of the room and adds to the sense of time slowly passing. The sound is inherently calming, yet also worrisome as it signifies the deterioration of the piece. Throughout the installation, the water stains created by the drip grow and spread across the leaky ceiling

¹⁸ Farr, Ian. *Memory* (Whitechapel: Documents of Contemporary Art). MIT Press. 2006. 267.

further contributing to the sense of passing time. The fallen water collected within the glass bowls eventually becomes too great and begins to slowly overflow from their edges, signaling a subtle loss of control. When caring for someone with memory loss, we cannot completely absorb what is lost nor can we entirely mend their cracks. Like the leaky ceiling, their condition worsens over time.

This installation was constructed within the space as an alcove, with three false walls, a false ceiling and a false floor in order to amplify and contain the dripping sound. The framework of the walls and ceiling are hidden by drywall and paint to mask the strength of its construction.¹⁹ This also allows the structure to become any age at any time and to blend somewhat seamlessly into the gallery space, placing the focus on the dripping motion. The water that drips from the ceiling and overflows from the bowls is absorbed through the cracks in the aged tongue and groove floorboards. It is then caught in basins hidden beneath the false floor. Every few hours, the water is silently pumped up through the false walls and back into the ceiling to pool and drip again.

¹⁹ Bachelard, Gaston. *The Poetics of Space*. Translated by Maria Jolas. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1994.18.



Fig. 9. *Catch*, Allyssa Burch, Atrium Gallery, 2018



Fig. 10. *Catch*, (detail) Allyssa Burch, Atrium Gallery, 2018



Fig. 11. *Catch*, (detail) Allyssa Burch, Atrium Gallery, 2018

Across from the drip installation, a gathering of mismatched wooden chairs, each with their own history, stand directed away from the viewer in a non-particular manner. A transparent gilded glass bowl rests upon each chair. The light from the gallery highlights the bowls, casting their unique shadows upon the chair seats. The back walls of the gallery are darkened and the chair shadows are cast heavily upon the floor, grounding them in the ambiguous space. Some of the bowls still hold a bit of water, while others have emptied. The evaporation process continues throughout the exhibition leaving many of the bowls to contain only a crystalized residue. This piece, entitled *Remembrance*, speaks of the connectivity and isolation associated with memory loss and the grieving process. It draws upon the symbolism explored in *Catch*, as well as the representation of the chair as an anchor for memory and a stand in for oneself.²⁰

With this piece, I aim to connect my experiences with those of a greater audience. Each chair and bowl are slightly different from the others, representing many different people each carrying their own memories. The positioning of the chairs with their backs facing the open room separates them from the rest of the gallery. It inhibits the viewer from their implied activity, causing the viewer to engage more intimately with the work by maneuvering around the piece for a better look. The positioning of the chairs inspires notions of a community, as well as feelings of separation and futility, as the focus of the collection is directed at the darkened wall which becomes a void. This is the void which grows within us when we've lost someone. It is also the ever increasing emptiness of suffering the loss of yourself, your life, and your loved ones through the loss of your own memories. Those living in both situations endure the emotional hardship of the loneliness, sadness, anger, fear and helplessness experienced through loss.

²⁰ Halbwachs, Maurice. *Collective Memory*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1992.128.

The bowls were gilded during the creation process, allowing the gold leaf to become a part of them, accentuating their value. The shapes of the bowls were created to resemble a wash basin. Feelings of guilt are a natural part of the grieving process, and the act of washing has been psychologically proven to ease feelings of guilt.²¹ Some of the gilded memory collectors (bowls) still contain water, and others are now empty. The remaining water references the containing of memories explored in *Catch*. It also draws upon the symbolism of water used for washing, or water (memories) as the source of life. The crystalized residue left behind in the emptied bowls smells of salt and may reference the salt that is used in the preserving process, the phrase, “the salt of the earth,” and the salt found in tears.



Fig. 12. *Remembrance*, Allyssa Burch, Atrium Gallery, 2018

²¹ Lee, Spike W.S., and Norbert Schwartz. “Wiping the Slate Clean: Psychological Consequences of Physical Cleansing.” *Current Directions in Psychological Science*. 20, no. 5 (2011): 307-311.



Fig. 13. *Remembrance*, (detail) Allyssa Burch, Atrium Gallery, 2018

To the right of the chairs is a piece entitled *Preserve*, which explores the essence of a loss and what remains of a comforting memory. *Preserve* is comprised of a timeless but worn wooden dining table which holds three slumped glass plates. The dining table has long been seen as a happy gathering place for friends and family. This table is absent of its chairs allowing the viewer to imagine themselves and their memories seated at the table and placing the focus upon the plates. Each plate may act as a stand in for someone and preserves the memory of a favorable time. A remnant of the cherished tablecloth my mother figure reserved for holidays has been fused within each plate. Every birthday and special occasion witnessed and the memory of her love preserved in the porcelain cloth and enveloped between two layers of glass. The plate form lifts the tablecloth from the table, separating it and allowing it to catch the light. The light from the gallery reflects off the plates, highlighting the shadow of the lace that falls upon the table and casts ethereal forms upon the wall.



Fig. 14. *Preserve*, Allyssa Burch, Atrium Gallery, 2018



Fig. 15 & 16. *Preserve*, (detail) Allyssa Burch, Atrium Gallery, 2018

Returning to the outside of the gallery, the viewer carries the influence of the pieces they have observed inside of the gallery, while they take a closer look at what lies within the walled off corner. Within the created room, there is a puzzle table with chairs, and a partially completed puzzle. There are books and extra puzzles scattered upon shelves. A chair with a small spill of glass honey resting on its edge sits next to the bed upon which a large pool of glass honey has collected, appearing to sink into mattress. Upon the pillow a delicate glass honeycomb lies within the indentation where a head would rest.

My mother figure was a lifelong beekeeper and school teacher who succumbed to Alzheimer's and Dementia this past summer. Spending the last several years watching helplessly as she lost herself and her mobility over time is the driving force behind my sculptural explorations. This installation which often inspires feelings of familiarity, sweetness and disgust, relives her final days. The piece relies heavily on the symbolism surrounding honey. Honey is symbolic of sweetness and represents the riches of life. Some view memories as their greatest wealth. Honey may also be utilized for the preserving of fruit and was once used in embalming. Through these uncanny implications, the honeycomb becomes the fragile memory holder, while the honey becomes the memories of which we are comprised, slowly seeping away.

While viewing the work, the viewer may choose their own level of involvement with the piece. The viewer may only interact with the work within the gallery space. They may take on a more voyeuristic role, viewing the room through the bookshelf. Or, they may choose to view the work as if they themselves are seated at the puzzle table. Each method separates the viewer from the event taking place, dividing them through lath and plaster walls, or through glass doors and windows, as they participate in the inevitable waiting.



Fig. 18. *Cessation*, (outside view) Allyssa Burch, Atrium Gallery, 2018



Fig. 19. *Cessation*, (outside view) Allyssa Burch, Atrium Gallery, 2018

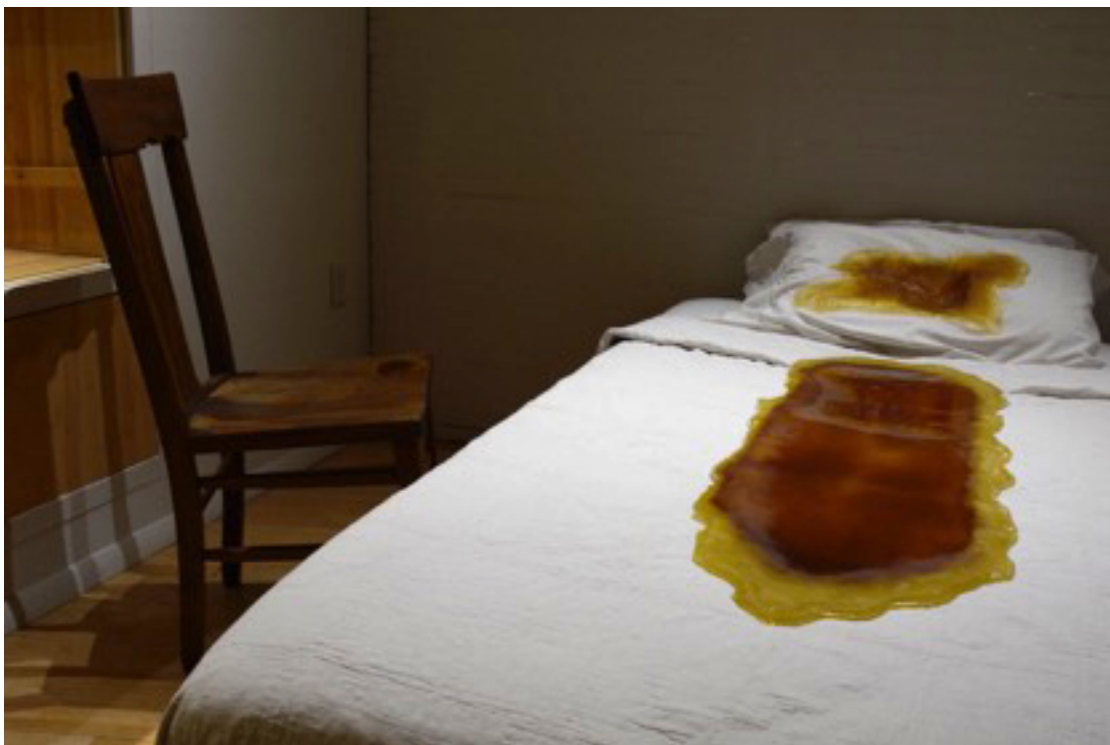


Fig. 20 *Cessation*, (detail) Allyssa Burch, Atrium Gallery, 2018

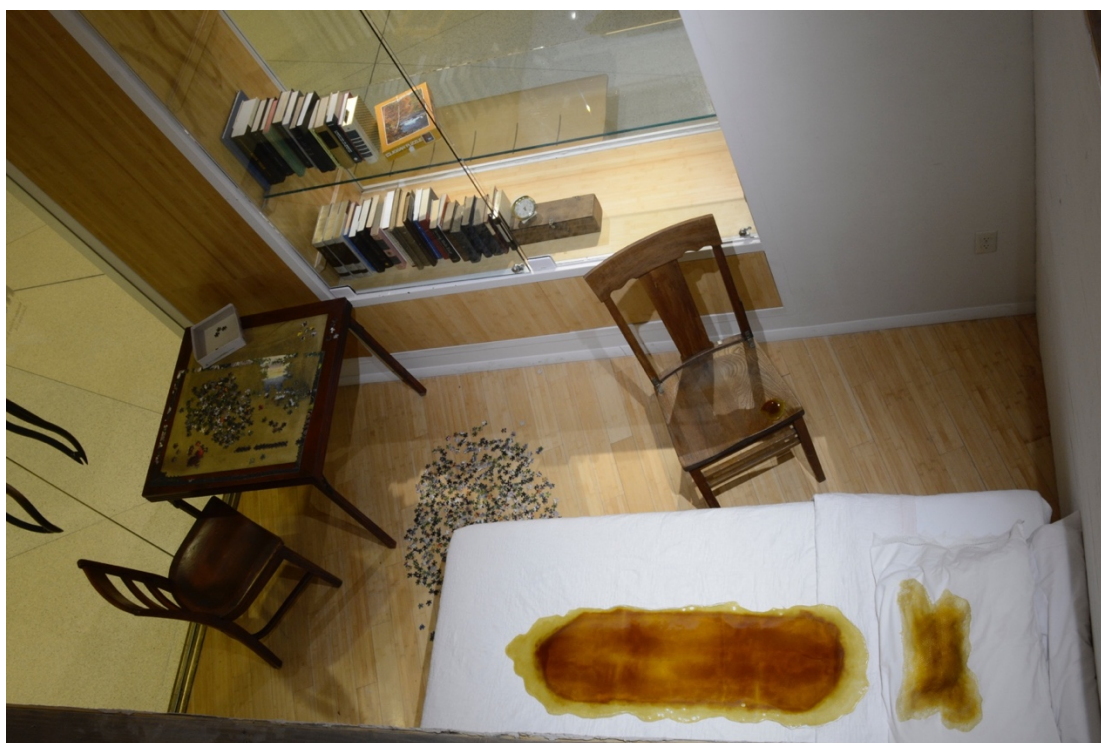


Fig. 21. *Cessation*, (view from above) Allyssa Burch, Atrium Gallery, 2018

Conclusion

This body of work undertakes the delicate responsibility of drawing from personal stories of both my own and those belonging to others I have encountered, and memorializing them. The work explores the bittersweet notions of loss and connectivity through the sculptural recreation of experiences and objects into glass and installation art. It utilizes the balance between the familiar and the unfamiliar, as well as presence and absence, to elicit poignant personal associations within the viewer. Through the physical representation of bereavement, the work quietly affirms the universal need for closure through mourning, and elicits opportunity for cathartic and communal remembrance.

Exhibition Statement

Bittersweet utilizes installation, mixed media glass art to explore the relationships between memory loss and the grieving process. This thesis body of work aims to promote understanding, empathy and healing through the employment of mixed media installation and video art. The replication of objects of sentiment into glass (which can appear ephemeral, fragile and cold, yet simultaneously archival, protective and sentimental) intertwine with familiar and comforting domestic materials such as fabric, wax, and honey to elicit sense associations from within the viewers own memories. Whether recreating a moment, mourning a loss, or exorcising an experience, my work serves to establish an emotional connection and allow others space to remember, cherish and grieve their personal memories through the sculptural personifications of the experiences of both those living with Alzheimer's disease and of those they leave behind. This body of work is the culmination of three years of investigation explored while pursuing a Master of Fine Art in Glass at Ball State University.

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